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About CRP News & Background

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India's consul got arrested in New York

Deputy consul general of India to New York Devyani Khobragade got arrested after she was suspected with visa fraud and with underpayment of her maid. The Indian authorities called the action humiliating and scandalous that can basically effect the Washington-New Delhi relations.

The events were followed by several negative reactions from both civilian and opposition side in India. Opposition MPs called the Parliament to take serious actions and to do everything to achieve that Americans would treat Indian citizens as equal as every US citizen is treated in India. After these opinions US Secretary of State John Kerry called Indian diplomats to express his regret about the events and his hopes that it will not evolve into a conflict between the two countries.

Indian authorities say that Kerry's apology was not enough and the USA should officially admit that it made a mistake – after dropping all the charges. So far the US authorities claim that they acted over reasonable suspicion.

Concerning the concrete charges, Khobragade wrote on her maid's visa application that she would be paid 2,500 dollars while in the reality didn't get more than 573 dollars – that is less than the minimum wage in New York State and this way is against the country's law.

Now as a reaction India stood up against American citizens and diplomats. They

limited some of the diplomatic privileges that used to concern American diplomats and their families and it will monitor their taxation to avoid fraud. India will also check the tax statuses of American citizens working at schools.

Devyani Khobregade denied all the charges and was freed on bail of 250,000 dollars. India's Foreign Minister Salmas Khursheed is now working on restoring the dignity of the young officer. But if she will be found guilty later, she can get 10 year for visa fraud and 5 years for the false statements after the arrest.

Her lawyer is going to try to refer to the diplomatic immunity during the proceedings despite the fact that according to the United Nation's Convention on Consular Relations it provides immunity only in job-related cases. Moreover, the USA claims that she didn't have the full immunity at the time of the fraud.



Devyani Khobragade. Photo: Devyani Khobragade [Flickr]



Catalan referendum questions agreed - What next?

Artur Mas, President of the Generalitat of Catalonia and the leading Catalan nationalist coalition the Convergence and Union (CiU), has announced on 12 December that his government has managed to agree on the date and questions of the proposed independence referendum. The vote – would be held on 9 November 2014 – would ask two questions: “Do you want Catalonia to be a state?” and “Do you want that state to be independent?”. The four parties that reached the agreement – the CiU, the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), the Initiative for Catalonia Greens (ICV) and the Popular Unity Candidates (CUP) – have a total of 88 seats in the 135-member Generalitat. Branches of the national parties, the Socialists’ Party of Catalonia (PSC) and the People’s Party of Catalonia (PPC) have not supported the decision. As Enric Millo, spokesman of the PPC said: “Everyone knows that this referendum will not be held, but they insist on spinning this fantasy. It’s a false hope. This cynicism will end in frustration and can only lead to social confrontation.”

The drafting of the referendum questions had proved to be the key point of prior consultations, since the Republican Left of

Catalonia (ERC) had made clear that if the questions do not refer explicitly to independence, the party will withdraw from the pact granting the CiU the majority, thus the ability to govern. “A clear, honest question with a yes or no answer that everybody understands [is needed]. People took to the streets for independence and they should be asked about that.” – said Anna Simó, spokeswoman of the ERC. The party had also reminded Mas that the approval of the region’s 2014 budget is in its hands and had even called on the citizens to use their voice to pressure the CiU into calling the referendum. Although eventually the questions will not be what the ERC wanted, the agreement “includes the majority of the Catalan assembly, which is the most important”.

Spanish Minister of Justice, Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón has hastened to point out that Spain’s current constitution would not allow making such a vote. Later, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has reiterated that he does not see a way for the referendum to pass. “As Prime Minister I have sworn to uphold the constitution and the law and, because of this, I guarantee that this referendum will not happen.” – he said. Indeed, under the



current regulations a referendum can only be called by the national government, not by the autonomous communities. Although Mas has replied that “there is time to comply with laws and democratic processes”, it is unlikely that the national parliament would approve a change in the constitution. On the one hand because of the close – November 2014 – deadline, on the other hand because the constitutional amendment in Spain is an extremely complicated legal and also political process. If the conditions remain unchanged, the vote will be described as a “popular consultation” which result however, is not legally binding. Therefore, it is far from clear what would happen, if the majority did vote yes to both proposed questions. The Catalan government had said earlier that – with the support of the majority of citizens – it might be prepared to make a unilateral declaration of independence once all other possibilities have been exhausted. However such a decision would have serious consequences.



The seal of the Generalitat of Catalonia

Anyway, Mas has appealed directly to the Rajoy government to negotiate the referendum on the basis of the newly established agreement between the four Catalan parties. Although the Catalan leader’s “blackmail potential” has increased again – which can be a powerful weapon during the fight for autonomy – Rajoy sees no chance for a mutually prosperous compromise. “I say yes to dialogue with everybody, but no to dividing Spain” – he said.

Spain on the way of recovery

“If 2012 was the year of cutbacks and 2013 the year of reforms, 2014 will be the year of recovery” said Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy at a press conference held right after the final cabinet meeting in 2013. His optimistic statement has been based on the country’s narrowing risk premium to 230 basis point from the dangerously high level of 2012, a six-percent increase in exports and the 105 billion Euros that have been set aside for the government’s Economic Liquidity Fund. He was also certain that in 2014 the country will witness a drop in unemployment which rates are extremely high, especially among young people.



Tensions still on high in Kiev

Huge demonstrations have been going on in Kiev since 30 November when President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign an utmost important association treaty with the European Union. Ukraine's society is now divided basically into two parts: those who support Yanukovich and those who support the EU.



*A line of riot police officers under thr heavy snow fall in Kiev.
Photo: Mstyslav Chernov [mstyslavchernov.com]*

The pro-EU protesters' final goal is not only the full integration, but even getting rid of the current political leaders, especially from Yanukovich. They are planning to continue the demonstrations until this happens. Yanukovich reacted to the demands with a no-confidence vote but in spite of the expectations it ended with the strengthening of the president's power.

The European Union was called many times by the pro-EU demonstrators to support their cause and step up against police violence but no result has been reached yet – apart from condemning the serious events. The main reason is that every step that the EU takes against Ukraine, brings it even closer to Russia and isolates from Europe at the same time. Maybe individual steps can be taken by the member states if they freeze Yanukovich-related bank accounts, but according to experts it is not likely to happen in the near future.

Moreover, Russian President Vladimir Putin's attitude towards demonstrators is quite negative and negligent that makes the negotiations seem even more unrealistic. As he previously said, "The events in Ukraine



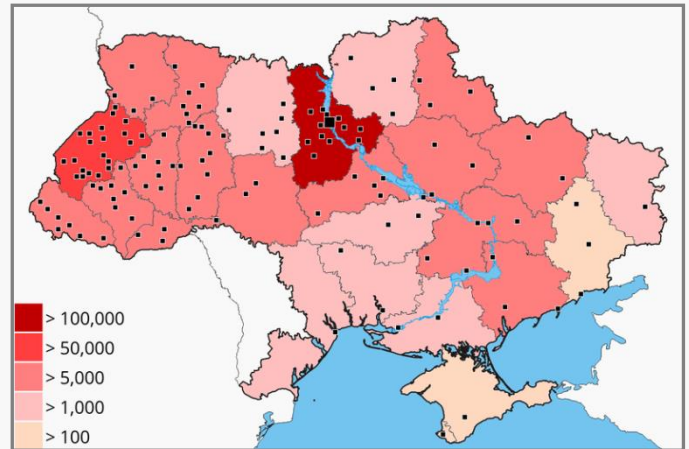
*Interior troops holding protective position under Molotov Cocktail rain.
Photo: Mstyslav Chernov [Unframe]*



seem more like a pogrom than a revolution... it has little to do with Ukraine's relations with the European Union". Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also expressed his opinion about the events and emphasised that no other country should step up on either side as it is Ukraine's own issue that has to be solved on its own. He referred to the demonstrations in an interview as a "domestic issue".

In the meantime Yanukovich tries to find a solution for the problem that is acceptable for both sides. He repeatedly told that he wants closer ties with the EU and European integration but Ukraine cannot afford the losses that would be caused by losing Russia as a partner. Stopping the negotiations mean some kind of "pause" for him.

Western politicians, such as US State Secretary John Kerry still do not consider it an acceptable reason as without the



Map of Euromaidan protests in Ukraine.
Map: Wikimedia Commons

support of the Ukrainian citizens it is rather a personal than a political decision.

Moreover the Russian and the Ukrainian president held talks between the biggest demonstrations on 6 December to build up a new strategic partnership. As a result Kiev got 15 billion dollars aid package from Moscow. This act made the demonstration more intense and became a new obstacle for the negotiations with the protesters.

“every step that the EU takes against Ukraine, brings it even closer to Russia and isolates from Europe at the same time”



Corruption scandal in Turkey

Three Turkish ministers, Economy Minister Zafer Caglayan, Interior Minister Muammer Güler and Environment Minister Erdogan Bayraktar resigned over a corruption scandal after their sons – as they tell – without any reason were taken into custody with 22 other people. Bayraktar's son was the only one who has been released from custody.

Between the charges can be found bribery on constructions and illegal money transfers to Iran. In a telephone interview Bayraktar said that Prime Minister Erdogan put a huge pressure on him to resign, this is why he thinks that he has to do the same. According to him the Prime Minister was highly involved in most cases into the construction projects so he must have seen the signs of corruption as well.

While everyone claims his innocence, a huge amount of money has been found in the suspects' house, solely one of them owned more than 4 million dollars in a shoebox. However, it must be added that most of them had good excuses for having such a lot of money kept at their homes.

According to Erdogan it is just a try from foreign and Turkish opponents to take away the chances from them at the approaching local elections. He calls for further investigations as he does not want corruption to be acceptable in Turkey.

Some experts consider the whole corruption scandal a fight between Erdogan and his biggest rival, Fethullah Gülen who has many followers in Turkey. But he denied any involvement in the corruption so no result can be reached until the official investigation ends. The EU also called for taking all the necessary measures to assure the transparency and impartiality in Turkey.

The scandal has already caused a huge loss to Turkey, as the exchange rate of lira significantly fell. It has also been followed by demonstrations from pro-Erdogan, as well as from anti-government side. This is why military forces and the police of Turkey declared that they do not want to be a tool of political games and want to be neutral in the future as well.

EU-Turkey visa deal reached

The European Union and Turkey launched the process of visa freedom on 16 December. The agreement was reached after talks between Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Cecilia Malstöm and Stefan Füle, European commissioners for home affairs and enlargement. In three years time – if everything goes according to the plan – Turkish citizens can travel to the EU without visa. In return, Turkey signed the Readmission Treaty in 2011. After long talks it agreed to accept migrants who illegally enter to the EU via Turkey. The new visa agreement is highly important in Turkey-EU relations as it can be a great opportunity for Ankara to get closer to the European integration.



Syrian civil war has caused more than 130,000 casualties to date

At the beginning of December, the US and UK, those of the countries which support the opposition forces in Syria, decided to suspend the stream of all non-lethal support for rebels in Syria, except for humanitarian supplies, which are distributed through international and non-governmental organisations. The non-lethal support includes communications equipment, medicine and vehicles.



A Free Syrian Army member prepares to fight with a tank whose crew defected from government forces in al-Qsair. Photo: Christian Galvez (Freedom House/Flickr)

The two states favoured suspension after reports informing about the seizure of Free Syrian Army (FSA) bases by Islamist rebels, specifically the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey. FSA members were ousted from the mentioned base by a recently established alliance of rebel units called Islamic Front. Uniting seven former rebel groups, the

Islamic Front became the biggest rebel alliance with approximately 45,000 militants fighting for the ouster of the president and the creation of an Islamic state. Shortly after the establishment, the Front rejected the authority of the FSA, which was till that time the strongest rebel force. In the Bab al-Hawa incident, dozens of anti-aircraft weapons and anti-tank rockets were stolen. The US and UK suspended their supplies to the North of Syria because of serious concerns that the equipment might end in the hands of al-Qaeda jihadists.

Hugh Robertson from the British government claimed, that “as far as we know at the moment”, there were no weapons coming from Britain that would end in possession of Islamist aggressors. He further added: “It does make sense to suspend that aid until we know exactly what’s happened.” On the other side, the FSA argueded, that the suspension of material aid was not necessary and expressed its hope that its supporters will review their decision as soon as possible. Turkey as a reaction on the information about the seizure of Bab al-Hawa, closed its borders with Syria.

Meanwhile, preparations for Geneva-2 Peace Conference, that is scheduled to be



held on January 22, are in progress. The start date of the negotiations over Syria, January 22, was agreed by diplomats from Geneva, Middle East and world powers. There are still some grave challenges regarding the Conference, particularly over the participation of most affected parts of the conflict. Lakhdar Brahimi, the Arab League envoy, was intensively negotiating with American and Russian diplomats in order to prepare an appropriate political environment for the Conference. There will be a definite necessity to lead talks between Assad and rebels, said Brahimi. However, the opposition has already previously designated the possible negotiating with Assad as a betrayal.

The preparation process got even more complicated after Bashar al-Assad's forces started a fierce air raid campaign in the city of Aleppo. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported, that at least 300 people died because of the air raids in Aleppo. In many cases, the government used barrel bombs. This act was condemned by rights groups. Syria's opposition stated that it would not attend peace talks in January in Switzerland, if the president's forces continued to attack Aleppo. The Syrian National Coalition "cannot in good conscience participate in peace talks in Geneva as Assad regime forces continue to bombard the city of Aleppo and surrounding areas for the ninth consecutive day", said the opposition member.

Almost three years ago had the bloody civil war started in Syria and deprived of life more than 130,000 people. Since the

outbreak of the violence, many intentions were brought to life in order to end the meaningless killing of thousands of innocent, but none of them brought tangible positive outcomes. Some even speak about the inaction of the international community that is unable to take effective steps to finally end the Syrian slaughter. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is a watchdog situated in the UK, from 130,000 victims, 46,266 were civilians, including at least 7,000 children and 4,600 women.



Demonstration in Homs, Syria in 2011. Photo: Alessio Romenzi [Freedom House/Flickr]

The conflict caused not only death of many, but also displacement of the great numbers of Syrian civilians, who usually seek to find safer shelter in neighbouring countries like Jordan, Turkey or Lebanon. These countries have to cope with the large influx of Syrian refugees. Germany announced it will provide more substantial assistance to Syrian refugees. Boris Pistorius, German interior minister for the state of Lower Saxony declared that Germany is ready to provide shelter to 5,000 Syrian refugees. "Millions of people have been forced to flee Syria as a result of the civil



war. We mustn't simply avert our eyes. Instead, we should show solidarity in the face of this humanitarian crisis by offering an amount of aid that corresponds to the actual capacity of individual EU member states", said Pistorius. Germany was rather reluctant to provide accommodation for a larger number of people who fled from Syria. Under the pressure of opposition politicians and human rights groups, that criticised the initial decision of government to provide shelter for only a particular number of Syrians, Germany decided to strengthen its help for refugees. In addition to around 1,000 displaced that have already arrived in Germany legally, almost 24,000 Syrians entered the country illegally according to Interior Ministry's sources.

The Syrian civil war, which destabilised the whole Middle East region, began in March 2011 as part of the Arab Spring domino. The revolution started as peaceful demonstrations against Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, whose family has been ruling the country for four decades. The series of protests demanding democratic reform were violently suppressed by the government's security forces, that led to the people's greater resistance and the uprising of military rebel groups seeking to topple Assad. The recent development of the strife does not indicate an early resolution of the conflict in a war-torn country.

Turkey supported Syrian rebels with military equipment

Despite the fact, that Turkey has already several times denied sending weapons to Syrian rebels, the UN documents revealed the opposite. "No war weapons have been exported to Syria in 2013", said Ismet Yilmaz, Turkey's Defence Minister. He further added that within the year 2013, the Defence Ministry had not issued any permits for the export of arms to Syria. On the basis of UN documents, since June, Turkey has sent more than 47 tons of weapons to Syria. Levent Gümrükçü, the spokesperson of Foreign Ministry, at first denied the information, but later admitted, that the numbers were coming from the Turkish Statistics Institute, that marked the military equipment as "guns without military uses." These weapons do not include for instance Kalashnikovs, which is considered sophisticated weaponry and thus its importation to Syria is prohibited. In August, rebel groups argued that Turkey had sent 400 tons of weapons to Syria. However, also then, Turkey vehemently denied the arguments. Turkey openly expressed its support towards the Syrian opposition, but has always denied sending war weapons to Syria. Turkey was accused by the international community of tolerating and even supporting militants that were crossing Turkish borders into Syria. On the other side, Turkey provides shelter for approximately 600,000 Syrian refugees who have escaped from the war-torn country.



Bringing peace to the Middle East

As hot spots of international relations and conflicts, Israel and Palestine are still seeking a mutually acceptable solution for their disputes mainly with American help. While solving the problem on a local level it is really important to build the relations with other countries and entities that can guarantee the future peace.



*John Kerry and Benjamin Netanyahu.
Photo: United States Government Work*

In the beginning of December Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Pope Francis held talks in Vatican about the complex political and social issues that are concerning the Middle East. As a main goal they mentioned the final peace between Israel and Palestine, solved by cooperation and mutual respect. In the end of the meeting even a visit was arranged by the Pope to Israel next year.

A few days after the meeting Benjamin Netanyahu discussed some specific issues with US Secretary of State John Kerry that ended with a joint statement. According to Netanyahu they focused on two main problems; first of all, on the danger the world is posed by Iran's nuclear programme, and on the Palestinian peace. The Israeli leader emphasised that his country is ready for the historic peace that is based on mutual understanding and consensus. John Kerry found it important to remind about the unbreakable US-Israeli bonds and even if they have different opinions and methods sometimes, the search of peace and security stays mutual.

John Kerry also met Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas for a four hour long talk. As a top negotiator told later, even after the meeting according to both sides "the situation is still very difficult and matters are complicated".

As a sign of cooperation, only a few days after the talks Israel, Palestine and Jordan signed a water-sharing initiative in Washington at the building of the World Bank. It has even bigger importance if we consider that it can mean the end of an eleven-year-long negotiation process.



But not only positive steps happened this month. Israel announced the construction of new settlements in the West Bank and in east Jerusalem that can mean an obstacle for the peace talks. At the same time Israel is about to release the third group of Palestinian prisoners that can mean the freedom of 26 people.

Because of the constructions John Kerry from Washington's side and also the Palestinian leaders are now worried about the future of negotiations that have been going on for almost nine months and are fragile to almost every bigger political steps.



Israel and its surroundings. Map: Wikimedia Commons

Arafat's death cause remains a mystery

After Swiss suspicions Russian experts say that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's death was natural and not caused by radioactive poisoning. Arafat died in 2004, officially because of stroke but he was also diagnosed with a serious blood disorder. The final conclusion can be vital in the Palestinian-Israeli relations as some accuse Israel with poisoning. Because of this, even after the new revelations the investigation continues.

Pope Francis is the Person of the Year

The American Times Magazine chose the person of the year of 2013. From the many nominees like Miley Cyrus, Edward Snowden or Bashar al Assad the magazine chose Pope Francis. As Times told, the Pope 'in his nine months in office, he has placed himself at the very centre of the central conversations of our time: about wealth and poverty, fairness and justice, transparency, modernity, globalisation, the role of women, the nature of marriage, the temptations of power'. The Times Magazine chooses the Person of the Year since 1927. So far there has been three papal winners, the previous one was Pope John Paul in 1994.



Resurfacing worries over atomic Iran

Iran's nuclear programme is getting into the centre of attention, as the possible non-peaceful use of atomic power could rearrange the balance of powers in the region and could have an effect on further countries as well.

US Secretary of State John Kerry held talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about the issue. Kerry stressed that it is still a priority to protect Israel at any cost, even in this situation. He referred to the bonds between the two countries as "unbreakable" ones. He has a strong position against Iran's nuclear programme. As he said, the US "will do everything in its power to make certain that Iran's nuclear

program – a program of weaponisation possibilities – is terminated".

At the same time the United States is not fully against the nuclear programme in Iran as peaceful and civil usage would be acceptable for Washington, too. They would agree on Iran's right to enrich uranium – of course at low levels. And all of these are possible only with strict monitoring and verification. Even if Iran says that it uses nuclear power only peacefully, as long as it has got such huge reactors as Arak the agreement seems not likely to succeed.

The United States, in order to achieve its goal, often uses sanctions against Iran. Even if the involved countries – United States, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany and the European Union – held talks in Geneva to do something about the nuclear programme, these measures can distract Iran from the search for peaceful problem-solving methods.

As one of the new sanctions, the USA has recently black-listed even more companies and people to prevent Iran from getting equipment for nuclear weapons. It concerns 19 companies and individuals and as Iranian officials said, the further talks will be held after having considered the



Anti-aircraft guns guarding Natanz Nuclear Facility, Iran. Photo: Hamed Saber [Flickr]



possible consequences on their citizens. They say that any kind of sanctions is completely against the “Geneva-spirit”.

As a result of the Geneva talks an interim plan was reached. Iran agreed to cap its uranium enrichment level to 5 percent and to neutralize its existing self-confirmed stockpile of 20 percent. In return, Iran can expect the rollback of certain sanctions. The next task is to implement the Geneva-measures and convert it from a political



P5+1 Foreign Ministers and Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif listen as European Union High Representative Catherine Ashton speaks at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, after the group concluded negotiations about Iran's nuclear capabilities on November 24, 2013

directive into an action plan. The first measures are planned to be taken in January 2014.

Iranian attack in Iraq?

According to US suspicions, Iran might be involved in an Iraqi massacre on 1 September 2013. The attack resulted in 50 victims who were members of Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK) on a military base called Camp Ashraf. The suspects are also accused by killing other seven MEK members but none of these charges have been proved yet. The United States is strongly concerned about the case as it can mean the growing presence of Tehran in Iraq.

“the United States is not fully against the nuclear programme in Iran as peaceful and civil usage would be acceptable for Washington”



Pakistanis protest against drones

Events in Pakistan are getting serious as huge and violent demonstrations are going on around the Afghani border. Pentagon Chief Chuck Hagel warned the country that if they do not do something efficient about the protests, it will be really difficult to keep the support of Washington that has brought billions of dollars to the country.

The demonstrations are creating an obstacle for some US shipments across the border, this is why it is really important to solve the problem as soon as possible. Because of the insecurity of these lines the NATO suspended all cargo travelling around that route to ensure the safety of the drivers and the staff. The Pakistani officials immediately promised steps to be taken but they have not declared the exact methods and details.

The anti-USA protesters demonstrate mainly against the CIA's drone programme. It was originally designed to fight against terrorists and with a few exceptions it has fulfilled its mission. But the drone programme has also resulted in many civilian victims and damages.

In spite of the events, the USA and Pakistan are constantly strengthening their relations and trying to expand the cooperation to more fields. They want security, a prosperous Pakistan, but concrete plans have not been made yet. The cooperation is a clear interest of both sides; Pakistan lacks foreign exchange while the United States wants Islamabad's assistance to stop a 12-year war in Afghanistan.

EU-Pakistani deal

From 1 January 2014 Pakistan gets its duty-free access to the European markets in the frame of EU's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) Plus. Getting into the European market has always been a priority for the Pakistani government as it gives new opportunities and approves the high quality of their products. The new act will make possible for Pakistan to export one billion dollars' worth of products. As expected, this change will enable the GDP growth and creates new workplaces that can reform the whole Pakistani economy.



Russia's endeavour on the international scene

While President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy gets lots of criticism, there are more and more signs indicating that Russia would like to return to great power politics. The most important examples of this trend in December 2013 are the followings.

After the meeting of Valentina Matviyenko, Chairman of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation and Olemic Thommessen, President of the *Storting*, the Norwegian MP has told a press conference that Norway intends to develop bilateral relations with Russia. "It is very important for Norway to develop and expand bilateral relations with Russia, which is our ancient partner and a country with rich culture. We rivet big significance to further strengthening of relations with the Federation Council" – he said. Valentina Matviyenko has also emphasised that "Russian-Norwegian relations could be an example of good-neighbourly partnership". They have both considered the meeting constructive and agreed to continue interaction within the Barents Euro-Arctic Region Council, in the field of environmental, military, economic issues and trade problems.

Following this discussion held on 5 December, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei



Minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov and minister of foreign affairs of the Republic of Poland Radosław Sikorski. Photo: Poland MFA [Elickr]

Lavrov and his Polish counterpart, Radosław Sikorski signed a document called "Program 2020 in Polish-Russian Relations" on 19 December. The agreement outlines priorities and cooperation directions for relations between Russia and Poland until 2020. Politicians have also agreed to strengthen their countries' political, economic, cultural and scientific ties and also their future joint actions on the international scene. "We decided to pursue activity at the United Nations, the OSCE, the Council of Europe [...] but also to reinforce effectiveness and trust at the heart of the NATO-Russia council" – said Lavrov.



It is interesting that Lavrov sees chances to restore diplomatic ties with Georgia as well, as it has come to light at the Russia-NATO Council meeting held on 4 December in Brussels. Georgian Foreign Minister, Maia Pandzhikidze shares his enthusiasm, claiming that Tbilisi would re-establish relations “with great pleasure”, however only if Russia withdrew the recognition of South Ossetia’s and Abkhazia’s independence. Since Lavrov has emphasised at the forum that “this is a new reality in the Caucasus and this reality has to be recognized”, the reconciliation still might be far away.

Another territory where Moscow’s growing influence can be observed is the Middle East. Recently, Sergei Lavrov’s phone conversation with Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas leader has got international attention. Allegedly, Lavrov has called for the speedy lifting of the Gaza Strip blockade in order to improve Palestinian civilians’ humanitarian conditions. In the meantime he has pointed out the importance of establishing an independent and integral Palestinian state that would “co-exist in peace and harmony with its neighbours”.

Speaking of the Middle East, the talks of Sergei Lavrov and his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif should also be mentioned. Lavrov has declared that Moscow would like to continue the cooperation with Tehran to help develop its nuclear energy industry. “We know that Iran is working to establish new [nuclear] facilities, including Bushehr. No UN Security Council resolution has put a ban on such reactors” – he said at a press conference.

No doubt that Russia has serious interests in the Middle East – including Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well –, however the same can be said of its role in East-Central Europe. On 17 December Vladimir Putin and Viktor Yanukovich Ukrainian President signed the so-called Ukrainian-Russian action plan and agreed that Russia will convert fifteen billion dollars worth of its National Welfare Fund into Ukrainian securities to help it stave off financial crisis and that the cost of Russian natural gas supplied to Ukraine will be significantly reduced. The agreement was followed by massive protests claiming for closer relations between Ukraine and the European Union instead of the deepening friendship with Russia.

Suicide attacks in Volgograd

17 people have been killed and several have been wounded in a suicide attack, occurred at the central station in Russia’s southern city, Volgograd. Although President Putin has immediately ordered security to be tightened all across the country, a second blast hit only a day after the incident and killed another 17 people on a trolley bus. Moscow is concerned about the 2014 winter Olympic Games of Sochi – going to be held in six weeks – since the venue is close to Volgograd and the North Caucasus region. For now, no group has claimed responsibility.



Chinese foreign relations: Busy schedule for December

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs closed an eventful month in December 2013 since its politicians had negotiations with leaders from practically all around the world.

On 2 December, 2013 British Prime Minister David Cameron arrived in China and held a three-day visit with around 100 business people and talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. The focus of the negotiations was on a multi-billion-dollar free trade deal between Beijing and the European Union that Cameron would happily support. "Some in Europe and elsewhere see the world changing and want to shut China off behind a bamboo curtain of trade barriers. Britain wants to tear those trade barriers down. [...] I see China's rise as an opportunity, not just for the people of this country but for Britain and the world – he said. The Prime Minister welcomes Chinese investment in nuclear power and infrastructure and he has also engaged to communicate and coordinate with China on international relations and regional issues promoting the recovery and sustainable development of the world economy.

Later, on December 6, 2013 Xi Jinping met French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault

and agreed to deepen cooperation in nuclear energy, aeronautics, astronautics, food security, agriculture, telecommunications, medicine, financial services and the automobile industry. Moreover, they have had the same opinion of increasing coordination on regional and global issues and on the sustainable growth of world economy.



Detail of China's air defense zone, including air space above a resource-rich chain of uninhabited islands claimed by China and controlled by Japan. (shown as Senkaku). Photo: VOA

On the very same day it came official that China had refused to participate in a United Nations arbitration process over a territorial conflict with the Philippines. Despite China's non-cooperation, a panel of judges is still required to issue a ruling in the case, however there are no way of enforcing any directive. The legal dispute is based on China's aggressive geopolitical approach in the Pacific region including





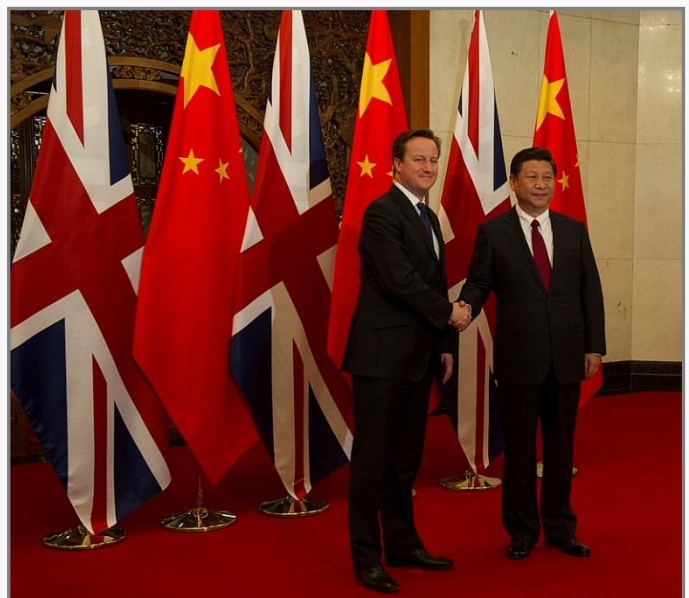
*A Coast Guard patrol vessel passes by Uotsuri, the largest island in the Senkaku/Diaoyu chain.
Photo: Al Jazeera English*

the East China Sea over which it had declared an air defence identification zone (ADIZ). The ADIZ covers the disputed Senkaku Islands and areas of ocean that are close to Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. These territories are considered international waters by the United States. Joe Biden, Vice President of the US made it clear to the Chinese President that the United States has “deep concerns” over the ADIZ, because it raises the possibility of “accidents and miscalculation”. His thoughts seemed to be confirmed when an American navy guided missile cruiser took evasive action to avoid colliding with a Chinese warship in the South China Sea. US officials claim that their ship was approached by the Chinese in international waters and they failed to stop despite repeated radio warnings. Fortunately, the navy personnel were able to prevent further deterioration of the incident.

Since China has announced the creation of the ADIZ, Biden has used every tool to put pressure on the Chinese government. For example, during his visit to Beijing in December he has tried to encourage

Chinese citizens to “challenge the government” emphasizing that “innovation can only occur where you can breathe free”. Naturally, Chinese state media hastened to criticise Biden’s speech by pointing out that “Washington has obviously taken Japan’s side”. The US ally Japan in the meantime approved a new national security strategy and increased its defence spending which means that it will buy several new drones, stealth aircraft and amphibious vehicles over the next five years. As a response to China’s territorial claims in the East China Sea, Japanese military will also build a new marine unit.

While tensions are rising ahead of the region, China continues its diplomatic mission establishing new friendly relations or strengthening old ones. On 19 December President Xi Jinping welcomed his Bolivian counterpart Evo Morales and agreed to keep high-level engagements between the two states. It includes not only the support of each other on major political issues, but

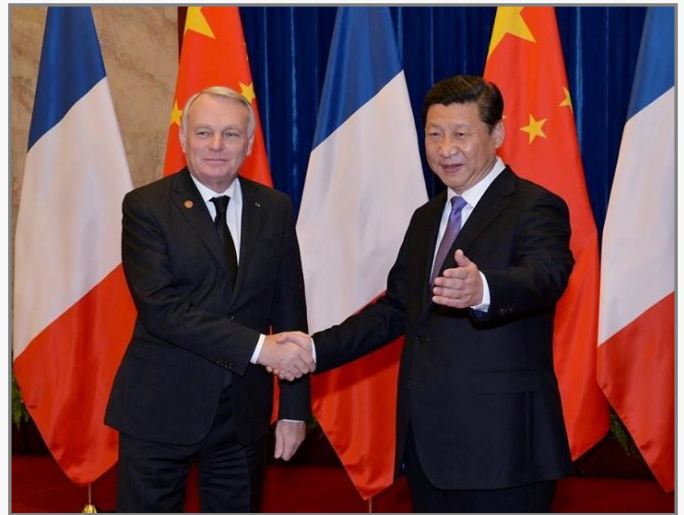


*Prime Minister David Cameron and President Xi Jinping, trade mission to China.
Photo: UK Government [Elicki]*



the increase of cultural, educational and tourism exchanges. The two sides also decided to promote balanced growth of bilateral trade and cooperation in the field of finance, agriculture, high technology and energy policy.

On 25 December a ministerial-level meeting took place with the participation of the Chinese and Saudi Arabian Ministers of Foreign Affairs. Wang Yi and Prince Saud al-Faisal discussed cooperation issues in such traditional areas as nuclear energy, trade and economy and aerospace. Prince Saud al-Faisal expressed his hopes that China will play a more active role in international relations adding that his



Jean-Marc Ayrault with Xi Jinping. Photo: Facebook

country is willing to support the Asian state in the framework of a pragmatic partnership.

The World is not enough – China on the Moon

China successfully completed its first moon landing in December with a rover named Jade Rabbit. The lunar triumph has got huge media coverage as China has been the only nation stepped foot on the Moon since 1976. Although China is still decades behind the US in space technology, its adventure has come at a time when NASA has been wrestling with budgetary restraints and struggling to achieve new milestones in space race.

“while tensions are rising ahead of the region, China continues its diplomatic mission establishing new friendly relations or strengthening old ones”



Central African Republic - on the way to genocide?

As the situation worsens in the Central African Republic (CAR), more and more people fall victim to sectarian violence and growing number of attacks through the country. According to a UN report, more than 600 people have been killed during only one week: 450 in the capital Bangui and 160 elsewhere. In the meantime, about 935,000 people have been displaced.



Rebel camp in the north-eastern Central African Republic. Photo: hdptcar [Flickr]

A new wave of mass violence broke out on Christmas Day when six Chadian soldiers from the African Union (AU) peacekeeping unit were killed in an ambush in Bangui. Official statements have confirmed that assailants have also attempted to break in to the presidential palace, however guards were able to push them back. Eloi Yao, spokesperson of the African Union has

declared that peacekeepers discovered a mass grave close to the residence. "We found around 20 bodies in a state of decomposition in an area that we call Panthers' Hill. The 20 were scattered in different graves in a small area. Five bodies were found in one hole, three in another, two in yet another and so on." Although the aggressors have not been immediately identified, according to rumours they were members of the Christian "Anti-Balaka" militia, a group believed to be supported by former President François Bozizé.

Bozizé acted as Head of State of the Central African Republic from 15 March 2003 to 24 March 2013 when the Muslim-backed Seleka militia – an alliance of warlords – and other rebel groups condemned his government for not honouring peace agreements of the CAR Bush War in 2007 and took control of his presidential palace. The deposed leader then fled to Cameroon where he was granted temporary refuge. In the meantime, Michael Djotodia – one of the Seleka coalition leaders – made himself president, becoming the first Muslim holding that office in the Christian-majority country. He officially disbanded the militia, however thousands of the members kept



their arms and continued to make violence and chaos through the country. In response to the atrocities, the mainly targeted Christian communities formed their own vigilante group, the earlier-mentioned “Anti-Balaka”, meaning also “anti-machete”.



Rebels in north-eastern Central African Republic. Photo: [hdptcar/Flickr](#)

Tensions have escalated over the past few weeks and are seem to end up in a humanitarian crisis as fighters of both religious and heavily armed groups go door to door murdering and raping civilians, set fire to cars and buildings, pillage and displace thousands of people. Since the government has proven to be incapable to handle the deteriorating situation, international peacekeeping forces get more and more importance. The medical charity organisation, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has already accused the UN for not giving an effective response to the crisis. In an open letter addressed to the international organisation, the MSF has stated it had repeatedly asked the UN to provide food, tents and other supplies for humanitarian purposes, which request has remained without any appreciable reaction. According to Tessy Fautsch

emergency medical coordinator for MSF, malaria and chest infections are the most frequent medical conditions, however the risk of emerging new diseases is incredibly high due to the lack of water and sanitation.

Recognizing the seriousness of the crisis, the African Union has already sent 6,000 peacekeepers to the country under the International Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA), however some analysts believe the situation will not change until a complete United Nations peacekeeping operation is deployed. Backing the AU's struggle to restore order, France has settled 1,600 troops in its former colony, however the intervention – authorized by the UN – was followed by demonstrations of Seleka members after three of their fighters had been killed in clashes with French soldiers. Protesters called French President François Hollande a “criminal” while they were repeatedly chanting “no to France” and



Kid in the Central African Republic. Photo: [Pierre Holtz | UNICEF/Flickr](#)

claimed his troops were only there to protect Christians. The United States has also engaged in helping resolve the crisis and has started airlifting Burundian soldiers into the country. According to top



diplomat Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US has set aside about forty million dollars to support the African Union's peacekeeping operations, including training and equipping troops, however she has emphasized that her country will not maintain any military presence in the territory of the Central African Republic.

Religious leaders are trying to seek reconciliation between Christians and Muslims as well. In the framework of accepting each other's faith, they met to distribute food to more than 10,000 displaced in the capital. As Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, president of the Islamic Central African community has emphasized before the crowd of Christians: "We are here because we are brothers first and foremost". Despite the nice and inspiring gesture, some people refused to take the offered food saying it might have been poisoned.

Most recently, the Amnesty International has urged the United Nations to act quickly and put an end to the evolving crisis. "The continuing violence, the extensive destruction of property, and the forced displacement of the population in Bangui are feeding enormous anger, hostility and mistrust" – said Christian Mukosa, the organisation's Central Africa expert.

For the time being, only a few things are known for sure. Firstly, despite all cries for help, the international community seems to be powerless to prevent further deterioration of the crisis. Secondly, President Michael Djotodia is considering the fears exaggerated. And lastly, in the meantime, the country – which has rarely seen political and economic stability since it gained independence in 1960 – is on a path that very likely leads to genocide.

French presence in Africa – a new era in relations?

French President François Hollande has agreed to help African nations create a joint military force during the Elysée Summit for Peace and Security in Africa, held in Paris on 6 December 2013. The two-day conference which took place with the participation of about forty African leaders, aimed to establish an effective military force in order to tackle coups, wars and rebellions on the continent. Colonial memories have undoubtedly affected the atmosphere of the meeting. President Hollande has emphasized that now "Africa must be the master of its own destiny and that means mastering its own security". Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita has added that "France is not Africa's policeman [...] but we have to ask ourselves what we have done with our independence".

“the situation will not change until a complete UN peacekeeping operation is deployed”



South Sudan on the brink of the civil war

Deadly clashes broke out in South Sudan and resulted in hundreds of dead and thousands of refugees seeking to find shelter in UN bases. The security situation in the oil-rich country is constantly worsening and may easily even get to the brink of the civil war again, US President Obama claimed. Salva Kiir Mayardit, the African country's President, declared one day after the incident, that the case was a failed attempt of the former Vice President Riek Machar, who was sacked by the government in July. Kiir informed that the unrest happened in the state's capital, Juba, and was reportedly made by the group of soldiers that are loyal to the current President's Deputy.



Salva Kiir Mayardit. Photo: Facebook

The armed battle stroke at night during the meeting of Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), when an unidentified soldier started shooting at the army headquarters. Shortly afterwards, the attack carried out by soldiers instructed by former Vice President proceeded near the university. The strife between opposing armed forces, that was accompanied by many explosions, became most intensive early in the morning. The government decided to close the airport and even the state TV channel SSTV stopped broadcasting for a short time. After several hours lasting gap, Kiir appeared on the screens, wearing military uniform. In his address, he informed that at that time, the situation was completely under control and the attackers would be fairly punished. "I will not allow or tolerate such incidents once again in our new nation. I strongly condemn these criminal actions in the strongest terms possible," he claimed and added that the ruling party will never let any forces to seize political power illegally. "Rest assured that the government is doing all it can to make sure that citizens are secured and safe." To confirm his statement, the President raised a curfew



that would be operative every night between 18:00 and 06:00 in the morning, until the situation gets stabilised.

South Sudan's state security is very sensitive as the country is considerably divided in a political and ethnical way. There are still many actively operating rebel groups and the perspectives that the government would be able to control them effectively in the near future are rather low. The main cause of this instability lays in the fact that South Sudan, which is one of the world's least developed countries, was suffering from the 22 years lasting civil war. The civil war ended with the declaration of independence of South Sudan from the North in 2011, by which the newly established state became the world's youngest. There are voices claiming that the violence in South Sudan is the result of continuing ethnic tensions between two most numerous and most powerful ethnics, the Dinka and the Nuer. These two warring ethnic groups fought against each other in the recent history.

President Kiir and Vice President Machar stand on the opposite sides of the ethnic conflict, the President is coming from the most powerful Dinka group, and his former Deputy is on the side of the second-largest Nuer community. Moreover, Machar is the leader of a dissident faction in SPLM. After President's attempt to dismiss the whole cabinet and his subsequent dismissal of Machar from his position, tensions between two communities inflamed. Machar announced that despite of numerous attempts to expel him from the political life of the country, he will take part in the

presidential elections in 2015. The government continues to deny the possibility that the fighting is caused by ethnic tensions. The head of the state asserts that the main reason of the



Salva Kiir and SPLM military officers. Photo: Facebook

instability has definitely a clear political core and is fuelled by his main opponent's motivation to seize power and political dominance. Riek Machar refused to react on the accusations and his then whereabouts were not obvious. Some sources argued that shortly after the attack, he was on the way to Sudan and others claimed he was still in Juba. His spokesperson later declared he had not been arrested and was in a safe place. The government however stated that it had already arrested several political opponents including former finance minister Kosti Manibe, and plan to accuse and arrest the former Vice President, too.

The US President Barack Obama expressed his serious concerns about the situation in South Sudan and called the participating sides in conflict to solve the problem by diplomatic means. "South Sudan stands at the precipice. Recent fighting threatens to



plunge South Sudan back into the dark days of its past. Inflammatory rhetoric and targeted violence must cease. All sides must listen to the wise counsel of their neighbours, commit to dialogue and take immediate steps to urge calm and support reconciliation.”

The credibility of the fact that the country is in a very grave situation is proven by estimated large numbers of victims and refugees. Since the conflict had begun, at least 500 people lost their lives. The number of refugees is alarming, too. According to the UN resources, approximately 16,000 people were trying to find shelter in the UN

basis of Juba in the first few days of the fighting. The last report however informed about together at least 34,000 refugees in three UN bases in the country. One of the UN mission workers said that the living conditions in UN bases across the country are “challenging” for the refugees. Some displaced are able “to construct basic shelters with available materials, but many have no or limited access to shelter”. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary General, similarly as the US President, recommended to President Kiir to “offer of dialogue to its opponents and to resolve their respective differences peacefully”.

Kenya accepts displaced people from South Sudan

The failed attempt to seize political power in South Sudan largely influenced not only the new state, but also its neighbouring countries. The violence became an African problem that gained a regional dimension. South Sudan's President Kiir met with Foreign Ministers of neighbouring countries with the aim to calm down concerns and tensions, that the conflict might spread also into their countries. Kenya's Interior Cabinet Secretary Joseph Ole Lenku expressed Kenya's interest in solving the situation in South Sudan. “We take cognisance of the unfortunate development in South Sudan but again we have made the necessary preparation with security with regards to our borders”.

Uganda involved at the highest level in the mediation process in South Sudan

Uganda President's spokesperson Ofwono Opondo declared, that the President Yoweri Museveni was asked by the UN to assist as an impartial party in the mediation process with South Sudan. Ugandan sources confirmed that Uganda will take part in the process at the highest level. “The government of Uganda maintains a neutral stance to the conflict in South Sudan and calls for restraint from the parties involved. We also recommend dialogue and a negotiated resolution to the on-going conflict in the country.”

China fears of losing its sources of its interests in South Sudan

China's government authorities decided to send their special envoy of Africa to the oil-rich country of Sudan in order to help the negotiators to progress in the talks and thus provide the protection of their considerable energy interests. China is not only the biggest investor in an oil industry, but also one of the main supporters of Sudan's President. The conflict in South Sudan influenced negatively the oil production, as some of the personnel were forced to be evacuated from oilfields.



A 30-day ceasefire does not mean peace

Colombia's largest leftist rebel group, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army) has announced a 30-day ceasefire on 8 December, 2013 after nine people had been killed in a bomb attack a day earlier.

This is not the first time that the guerrilla group declares a temporary truce during its fifty-year existence. In November 2012 the armed body announced a similar two-month-long unilateral ceasefire having regard to the approaching Christmas holidays. The government's current reaction is the same as it was a year ago. Politicians refused to follow suit and enter into a truce until a final peace deal is reached, arguing it would be a perfect opportunity for rebels to rearm. The FARC has hardly criticised the government's decision, emphasizing that "soldiers and police are also unnecessarily spilling their blood, while the national opinion observes this strange cocktail of death and dialogue, which is how the national government perceives reconciliation".

The FARC was established in 1964 as the military wing of the Colombian Communist Party. As a Marxist-Leninist organisation, its main aims are to represent the country's rural poor by seizing power through armed

revolution and to achieve the redistribution of wealth among the population. It strongly opposes however multinational corporations and the privatisation of national resources. Its operations are mostly funded by gold mining, kidnapping and the production and distribution of illegal drugs. According to some statistics, the attacks committed by the group have committed the lives of 220,000 people so far. The guerrilla organisation has already been classified as terrorist group by several states, such as Colombia, Chile, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and even the European Union while Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Argentina do not use such a strict classification.



FARC guerrillas during the Caguan peace talks (1998-2002). Photo: DEA Public Affairs



Although his predecessor, Álvaro Uribe strongly disagreed, the current Colombian President, Juan Manuel Santos has recognised that there is an armed conflict in the country. The government and the FARC have been carrying on negotiations since November 2012 in Havana, Cuba. Peace talks can be called quite successful, since the parties have already partially agreed on two points of the agenda – the land reform and the political participation – however they are yet to discuss another four major items, such as the disarmament, the rights of victims, the illicit drugs and the peace deal implementation. Negotiations are supported not only by Cuba, but also by the United States. President Obama has congratulated his Colombian counterpart, however he has made clear that there are still problems left to deal with.

Despite the ongoing peace talks and the unilateral ceasefire announced by the FARC, President Santos and his government is not considering suspending military pursuit of the guerrilla group. “If the FARC believe

that with acts like this they are going to lead us to a ceasefire, which is also what they are saying, they are totally mistaken. [...] We will continue attacking them. The offensive will continue” – he said.



Demonstration against FARC, held in Madrid's main square and more than 130 cities around the globe simultaneously in 2008. Photo: kozumel[Flickr]

A last note should be made: only days after the FARC's declaration, the group was accused by the United Nations' highest representative in Colombia of continuing to recruit minors between nine and fifteen. Therefore, it seems that real peace is still too far.

“the attacks committed by the FARC have committed the lives of 220,000 people so far”



■ News in Brief

Domestic affairs affecting international relations

Muslim Brotherhood officially qualified as terrorist organisation

■ The Egyptian ad interim military-backed government strengthened its fight against its greatest political opponent, the Muslim Brotherhood, when formally designating it as a terrorist group. This step practically means that the government is now justified to indict anyone who makes propaganda or provides financial support to the group. "This is a turning point in the confrontation. This is an important tool for the government to close any door in the face of the Brotherhood's return to political life," an expert on the group said. The designation came shortly after government's accusation of committing a bloody offence on police station during which 16 persons were massacred. Recently in Mansoura, a Sinai-based rebel group carried out a terrorist attack that injured about 140 people. The Muslim Brotherhood almost immediately officially condemned the assault. The US State Department also stridently condemned the bombing and called Egypt to lead an "inclusive political process."

Violence in Kenya between rival ethnic groups escalates

■ The conflict between ethnic groups in Kenya, especially in the Moyale town, has intensively aggravated recently and caused the death of at least 40 people and more than 20,000 displaced who fled to neighbouring Ethiopia. The final numbers of dead are however still not precisely known, as the humanitarian workers cannot get closer to stricken areas in order to count the dead. Kenya Red Cross regional coordinator said, that "the whole area is a battlefield, we cannot send our team to help those people injured, offer rescue or assistance, neither can we establish how many people have been killed or injured – but we can still hear heavy gun shots." The principal reason of the bloody clashes is the dispute among local communities over wanted territories. In addition, there have been politicians struggling for power by using gross power in new administrations that were created after recent elections. The situation in Kenya escalated largely also because of the spill over effect that caused the spread of tensions to Kenya from neighbouring countries like Somalia and Ethiopia. The Kenyan government has been moderating the situation by sending troops to problematic areas.



Nelson Mandela died at the age of 95

■ South Africa's first black president and anti-apartheid revolutionary has died on 5 December, in Johannesburg. The long-ailing politician had been receiving intensive medical care for a lung infection after spending three months in hospital. Mandela's state funeral was held on 15 December with the participation of around 90 representatives of foreign states. The former president was a controversial figure for much of his life. Although he was denounced as a communist terrorist by many people, he received more than 250 honours, including the Nobel Peace Prize.

Thailand's Democratic Party plans to snub the country's next elections

■ Leader of the Democratic Party, which is the major opposition party in Thailand stated, that the party will attempt to boycott February elections. "Thai politics is at a failed stage", said the leader Abhisit Vejjajiva. The election was announced by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra with the aim to moderate the alarming instable situation in country, which is marked by mass demonstrations. There are even concerns that the fragile political balance caused by political division may even lead the country to the civil war. The head of army, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, has suggested to calm down the situation by forming a "people's assembly", that would be made up of civilians from both sides. The mass protests in Bangkok are against the government and fuelled by the opposition.

North Korean leader's uncle fired from his influential function

■ Kim Jong-un's close relative, Chang Song-thaek, who had a powerful position of a vice-chairman in North Korean's military, was according to South Korean sources dismissed from his status. This removal is now considered the most substantial alteration in North Korean's government. Two other Chang Song-thaek's collaborators were reported to be accused of corruption and executed in public already in November. The major reasons why the leader decided to deprive his uncle from power have not been uncovered yet. He was seen as being most influential on Kim Jong-un. It was not the first time that Chang Song-thaek disappeared from public for a longer time. It also happened in 2004, when he vanished from public for two years in 2004.

Philippines likely to end Muslim insurgency in Mindanao

■ The Philippines will likely soon sign an agreed deal with Muslim insurgents. The agreement will be based on the power-sharing principle. On one side, it will guarantee authority recovery over certain issues, notably defence, monetary and foreign policy for the principal government. On the other side, the autonomous administration will dispose exclusive control over trade, agriculture, labour and tourism. The autonomous unit was named Bangsamoro and its government will be ruled by a ministry consisted of at least 50 members.



■ News in Brief

Bilateral relations

Sudan supports the construction of hydroelectric dam in Ethiopia

■ Shortly before the tripartite negotiations among Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia, Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir declared Sudan's assistance for Renaissance dam in Ethiopia. Sudan and Ethiopia agreed on 14 new deals regarding security, financial issues, free trade zone and electricity. In order to strengthen economic ties, the leaders further settled on building a new railway route between two states. "Backing the dam project is not a political stance, but rather a belief in its benefits for all Nile Basin states," argued Al-Bashir. Recently, Ethiopia has adopted a disputed deal that secures its access to Nile. The treaty enables other surrounding countries to use the water resources without asking for Egypt's approval. The document has clearly not been signed by Egypt and Sudan, Ethiopia signed it in 2010. Ethiopia started to prepare conditions for launching the construction of the dam that will likely be considered the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa.

Deal over presence of US troops in Afghanistan still not signed

■ Despite the fact that conditions of bilateral security deal between Karzai and the US government over the continuous stay of American forces in Afghanistan have already been negotiated, Karzai suddenly started to introduce new requirements. Karzai's decision to delay the approval of the deal shocked the White House. The agreement would legitimate US troops to stay in Afghanistan also in 2014 in order to help stabilise the security situation in the country. Washington is "nowhere near" determining if to withdraw all American forces from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, or not, the US high politician stated. "I have no doubt that the [bilateral security agreement with Afghanistan] ultimately will be concluded," said Ambassador James Dobbins, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Afghan PM asks for weapons from India

■ Afghan Prime Minister Hamid Karzai visited New Delhi to ask for more defence from India. Afghanistan's Ambassador to India told that it is highly important for both countries to have closer ties and cooperation, especially in terms of defence and security. Now Karzai arrived with a list of weapons he would like to get, but Indian authorities warned him that mainly because of the low capacities he cannot get everything he wanted. The decision can have political consequences too, as Afghanistan refused to sign a security agreement with the USA but did it with Iran.



Georgia and Korea on the way towards tighter relations

■ Georgia and Korea have started to actively work on strengthening common ties in order to achieve more viable diplomatic and political relations. Georgia's deputy foreign minister David Jalagania made his travel to Korea in order to lead second political negotiations with Ha Tae-yeok who is a director of the Eurasia division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Actually, it has been the first time that South Korean capital was visited by envoy from Georgia. "The two countries are geographically quite far away each other, but we are aimed at diversifying foreign relations. One of the dimensions is an Asian dimension, and Korea is an important part of that."

Cambodian Prime Minister makes his travel to Vietnam despite domestic insurgencies

■ In spite of sharp demonstrations demanding ouster of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, he organised his official visit to Vietnam. The Prime Minister substantiated his visit by the need to secure cooperation with Vietnam, in particular in the area of public security, trade, education, etc. The march against Prime Minister was organised by the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) and primarily motivated by reported fraud during recent elections. Some Sen's opponents and political analysts labelled his planned visit as at least uncommon during unstable situation at home. According to CNRP deputy president Kem Sokha, the Prime Minister likely intended to use his journey for gaining political support from Vietnam.

Australia-South Korea free trade agreement inked

■ Australia and South Korea have signed a free trade deal in an attempt to boost trade between the two countries. As a part of the agreement, tariffs on key Australian exports to South Korea – such as resources, energy and agricultural products – will be erased. Parties have also agreed on supporting South Korean firms in sectors of steel, car manufacturing and textile in order to boost their presence in Australia. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott hopes the benefits of the free trade deal would "start flowing immediately and will be long-lasting".



■ News in Brief

International relations

Joint military command formed by the GCC

■ The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has approved the setup of a joint military and police command during the two-day annual Gulf summit held in Kuwait City. The new institution is aimed to protect the six-member council from security threats in the region. Gulf States have also negotiated the idea of upgrading the GCC into a real union which proposal was highly welcomed by all member states except for Oman. Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah said his country will definitely withdraw from the council in case the other five members – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – decide to form the union.

Snowden offers support for Brazil with investigation of US spying

■ Edward Snowden has applied for a political asylum in Brazil in an open letter sent to “the people of Brazil”. The NSA leaker offered his help to Brazilian government with investigation the US spy case. As he stated in the letter, he will not be able to fully take part on the investigation without being granted a political asylum. He also expressed his appreciation for the vigorous attitude that the Brazil authorities adopted after spying scandal's disclosure, which revealed that Brazil has been spied most from all the Latin American countries. The collected data about Brazil included even President Dilma Rousseff's cell-phone calls. The case deeply outraged Brazilian officials, led to the alienating of diplomatic relations and even to the cancelation of President's official trip to the US. Snowden refused US excuses that the spying was rather “data collection”. “There is a huge difference between legal programs, legitimate spying ... and these programs of dragnet mass surveillance that put entire populations under an all-seeing eye and save copies forever. These programs were never about terrorism: they're about economic spying, social control, and diplomatic manipulation. They're about power,” he explained.

EU-Mercosur free trade agreement delayed

■ The European Union has requested a one-month delay in the exchange of proposals to start free-trade negotiations with South America's main economic bloc, the Mercosur. Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay were due to present their recommendations in the second half of December and hoped to sign the agreement in 2014 after almost fifteen years of preparation.



The rise of the far-right in Europe?

■ The German think tank Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in its new study warns about the possible rise of right-wing populist parties that can cause a huge threat for the approaching European Parliament elections. Recently there has been a growing tendency in the popularity of these political groups in Austria, France, and The Netherlands, having a big influence on almost every European country and effecting the local and the European level politics as well. As they are usually against immigrants and reject the outright of the European institutions, the study calls for stopping the ignorance of this phenomenon.

Romania and Bulgaria are unprepared for Schengen?

■ According to Germany's Interior Minister Hans-Peter Freidrich, Romania and Bulgaria are not yet prepared to join the passport-free Schengen area. The zone was created in 1995 and currently comprises 26 states, including the non-EU member Switzerland and Norway as well. Labour market restrictions on people from Romania and Bulgaria are due to be lifted on 1 January 2014 – seven years after their accession –, however some European states such as Germany or the United Kingdom are already suffering from wave of East-Central European workers. Therefore, while German politicians claim “the moment to remove border controls for these two countries has not arrived”, UK's Home Secretary Theresa May has announced that her country would like limits imposed on EU migrants' free movement within the Union.

Ninth WTO ministerial conference in Bali

■ The World Trade Organization (WTO) held its ninth ministerial conference on 3–7 December 2013, on the Indonesian island Bali. The result of the meeting is a trade agreement, called Bali Package which forms part of the Doha Development Round started in 2001. The document is aimed at lowering global trade barriers, such as import tariffs and agricultural subsidies therefore make it easier for poorer countries to compete with the US or Europe. Although experts are confident that the agreement could be a base for further negotiations, they also agree that big steps are still ahead of us.

TPP ministerial meeting held in Singapore

■ A four-day Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) ministerial summit was held on 7 December, 2013 in Singapore with the participation of 12 countries, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore, Brunei and Vietnam. The TPP talks are aimed at forming a huge US-led Pacific free trade area, however after four days of negotiations on the proposed topics the forum has failed to resolve all issues. Members intend to meet again in the first half of 2014. As Michael Froman, US Trade Representative said “we have decided to continue our intensive work in the coming weeks toward such an agreement”. Participating countries of the TPP talks make up forty percent of global economy.



ASEAN members and Japan attempt to form a “freedom of overflight”

■ China's move to unilaterally declare the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) that includes also disputed territories in the East China Sea has evoked a strong opposing respond by involved countries. Japan strove to gather other countries, especially those also having unresolved questions with China regarding certain territories to combat Chinese range. By this step, Japan openly bustled to push back Chinese expansive efforts in the area. As a result of active Japanese endeavour, Japan and ASEAN states “agreed to enhance co-operation in ensuring freedom of overflight and civil aviation safety”. According to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, torn Japan-China relations threaten stability in the whole region. “Indonesia is deeply concerned at the prospect of the disputes erupting into open conflicts, which will have adverse impacts on all countries in the region,” he added.

Sudan declared to become mediator in Ethiopia-Eritrea negotiations

■ Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir declared that he had triggered negotiations between two warring African states and offered neutral ground for mediating disputed issues. “We started some efforts to normalise the relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea,” the President said. He further added that Sudan has friendly relations with both states and can therefore provide an appropriate intermediary basis for negotiations. The state of warfare between Ethiopia and Eritrea started already decades ago as an Eritrean fight for gaining independence from Ethiopia. Eritrea managed to secede from the major state in 1991, but the war has with some negligible pauses continued even until today because of the unresolved disputes over territories. The long-termed quarrels ended in a full-scale war between two African countries from 1998–2000. The conflict became international when Ethiopia, aiming to support temporary government against rebel groups financially assisted by Eritrea, descended Somalia in 2011. Reportedly, the governments of both belligerent states continue to support rebel groups.

The UN mission to use surveillance drones for the first time in Congo

■ The UN's peacekeeping operation chief in Democratic Republic of the Congo, Herve Ladsous stated that the special UN forces will continue to fight actively against rebel groups in the east of country. Ladsous declared this statement after the UN forces together with Congolese military have managed to defeat rebel groups, namely the influential M23 group recently, considering it a great success. There is a “prospect of being able to go after other armed groups. Well, that's just what we are going to do”, said Ladsous. During the latest battle in Congo, MONUSCO, which is how the UN peacekeeping operation is called, has used surveillance drone for the first time ever. The UN mission is currently equipped by two such drones and should obtain three more until March 2014. According to Ladsous, drones will play a very important role in fight against insurgent groups.





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